DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 761 SP 012 557

AUTHOR Hergert, Leslie F.
TITLE The Linking Agent: The View From the Bridge.
INSTITUTION Network of Innovative Schools, Inc., Andover, Mass.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting, American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Canada, March 27-31, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies (Education); *Change Agents; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Needs; Information Systems; Program Development; *Reading Programs; *Research Utilization
IDENTIFIERS *Linking Agents

ABSTRACT

The author describes her experiences as linking agent in aiding four local Massachusetts schools to examine, choose, and implement innovative reading programs. A process rather than content expert, her task was to organize existing, widespread support for change within the schools and to work with both the principals and a multiconstituent (parent/teacher) group in using a systematic process to choose between programs and to operationalize the final program choice. (MJB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED152761

The Linking Agent: The View From the Bridge

Leslie F. Hergert
Linking Agent

The National Reading Consortium

The NETWORK
Andover, Massachusetts

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Leslie F. Hergert

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

Paper presented

American Educational Research Association

March 1978

3P012 357

The Linking Agent: The View From the Bridge

Leslie F. Hergert

Recently in education attempts have been made to bridge the gap between research and practice through the use of third party professionals. These intermediaries, or Linking Agents, work with both researchers and school personnel to help each benefit from and use the work of the other.

Linking Agents work in different ways and play different roles. In ERIC clearinghouses they are primarily information specialists, in the National Diffusion Network primarily curriculum disseminators. NIE's Research and Development Utilization Program has funded seven projects utilizing Linking Agents in several capacities but primarily as consultants helping a limited number of local schools to use research and development outcomes for program improvement. There are variations among the projects in both the plan of work and the content area focus.

The National Reading Consortium is a project of The NETWORK, an independent, non-profit linking agency in Andover, Massachusetts. In each of six states a Linking Agent, housed in a local agency, works with schools to adopt federally developed and validated reading programs. We see the curriculum improvement effort as linked to school improvement efforts and we believe that as people work together to define their school's needs in one area that they will learn more about working together and about using resources in other areas of school improvement.

I am The Consortium's Linking Agent in Massachusetts. I work with four elementary schools, each in a different school district, which had indicated an interest in improving their teaching of reading. The schools are geographically dispersed - two are in small cities near Boston, one in a suburb near Worcester, and the fourth is a collection of small schools - some one-room - in a regional district in rural Western Massachusetts.

My role is a combination of Process Consultant and Resource Linker. My area of expertise is in organizational processes and not in reading. At first the schools were puzzled by this because they were interested primarily in improving their teaching of reading and wanted to know what we had to offer as resources in terms of reading programs, literature searches, etc. Gradually they have come to value process assistance in helping them to work together to make a good decision and to support the program they chose. Most of my work has been with individuals and groups at the schools. The other part of my work has been the link with resources. I will expand on those two areas to give you a better idea of what I do and how the two areas fit together.

Process Assistance to the School

The school building is the focus of my intervention, and therefore the principal is my prime contact at each school. I have worked to make him or her my closest ally in the improvement effort. In some cases this took more work than others! It was most important for the principal to see that my primary affiliation was to the school and not to the central office. In some schools I have become

almost a confidant of the principal and in all of the schools I meet regularly with the principal to anticipate needs, to plan meetings, to find out what is going on in the school and the district. As all middle managers, principals are in lonely positions: overburdened with maintenance functions, caught between the demands of the central office and the needs of the teachers, often unable to provide the educational leadership function that attracts most to the job. It has become important to me to be seen by the principal as his or her friend, to provide a listening ear, to help in thinking through issues that arise related to the implementation of the new program. In most cases this has been mutually beneficial: the principals and I find each other a means of support; the principal's leadership of the improvement effort is essential to its success and satisfying to the principal.

In order to insure a broad base of support for the project, at each school we set up a multi-constituent group consisting of administrators, teachers, reading specialists, and parents. These groups or Task Forces were carefully drawn up to include the people or their representatives who would be most interested in the improvement of the reading program. In each instance, the principal was a member of the group, two parents were invited, some primary and some intermediate teachers, and a central office representative, either the Language Arts Coordinator or the Assistant Superintendent. In all of the schools, teachers were invited to volunteer for the Task Force and anyone who volunteered was put on it. In addition, care was taken to include people particularly important to an open consideration of the issue. In two schools Title I and Learning

Disabilities staff were involved; in some schools we took care to include some older teachers. Parents were actively involved in three of the four sites last year and remain involved in two of the four sites this year.

Last year the Task Force met about twice a month. Most meetings lasted for two hours with teachers released for part of the time. I served as group facilitator, leading the group through a linear problem-solving process. First each group developed a problem statement, then criteria for a solution. They examined about 40 programs developed and validated either in Federal Labs and Centers or in local Title III projects. They examined written descriptive materials of the programs, and after they'd narrowed their choice to two or three, visited schools using the program or interviewed the developer on the phone. All four schools chose a program by the end of the school year and this summer teachers were trained in the program. This year the Task Force, smaller and meeting less frequently, monitors the implementation, trouble shooting and planning such things as the evaluation of the program and communication with parents.

In most schools the Task Force became a forum for discussions of educational issues of special interest to its members. The group provided a place for teachers, administrators, and parents to discuss the school and the reading curriculum and often to see that they had a great deal in common. Many people told me that they found the group to be one of the most stimulating parts of their job last year. In addition, communication channels were opened between teacher and principal, between teachers and central office personnel,

between parents and teachers, which had not always been so open before. In some places, this had a profound effect on the climate of the school.

There were two times when I was struck by the importance of the forum and the discussion. At an early meeting at one school each group member had completed an instrument on how curricular improvement typically occurs in this district. The data was fed back to the group for discussion. Teachers were struck by the realization that the principal did not feel involved in such decisions and frequently had to carry out decisions he did not particularly agree with. They had aggregated "administrators" into one clump which was not so cohesive after all. It was a revelation to *me* that such a realization was a revelation to them!

At another site several people told me that they appreciated the chance to discuss the issues we dealt with in the Task Force. They were used to theoretical discussions in college courses or nitty-gritty discussions in the teachers' room. The Task Force discussions were neither and both, and thus they were seen as "important" by participants. The fact that the participants were making a decision on a program for the school led them to identify and discuss deeply held convictions about teaching and reading and these discussions led some extremely diverse personalities and beliefs to coalesce. This coalescence was especially valued because elsewhere in the district a bitter staffing battle was being waged.

I believe it was important to the success of these discussions that they were led by an outsider--an outsider to both the school and the subject matter. There were times when I said I was not following a discussion when 3 group members sighed in relief and admitted that they weren't either. There were times when my paraphrasing a controversial remark allowed an opponent to hear it and thus for the conversation to continue to resolution rather than to erupt in argument or to halt. There were times I could reintroduce a consideration or make a connection that would have been difficult for an insider to do. An outside facilitator was important to keep the discussions moving and to help people hear and talk with each other.

The Link with Resources

It is important to note here that the resources the schools are linked to in this project are not research papers and statistics. Rather they are programs developed specifically for schools (often by and in schools) and based on research. These programs have been developed in two ways: either in NIE funded regional labs and centers by professional curriculum developers and field tested in schools, or in schools by local teachers and administrators and validated by a review panel. In a real sense these programs are the link between research and practice for they translate research into a usable form for teachers and schools.

Since this is true, there is often a sense that it is enough. Program developers especially, who have worked hard to produce something that works, have a tendency to think that the schools have only to

do it. A great deal of energy has gone into developing "teacher proof" programs or perfecting teacher training for the new program.

There are two problems here which are helped by the use of a third party. The first is that the school must know that the resources exist. Currently federal and state governments are funding a variety of dissemination efforts to increase schools' awareness of available resources. The second is that the program must be right for the school and must be fit into the school.

The schools I worked with were attracted to participate in The Consortium by the knowledge that they would learn about a number of "good" reading programs. The Consortium provided an obvious service in gathering information about these programs into one place and providing comparable descriptions of them. This in itself is useful to schools.

More important however was helping the school make a good choice and facilitating the program implementation. Last year's work before a program was selected went a long way to insure that the program was appropriate for and wanted by the school. The fact that needs and goals for improvement were identified by the school itself prior to looking at programs helped the school to focus its search. The fact that so many people and groups were involved in the program selection helped to insure that it was wanted by people who would have to implement it and that it would be widely supported by others.

My role was to design and lead the meetings, to help group members to talk openly with each other, to resist premature closure on discussions, to test for consensus. When my schools were close to a decision and were talking to developers and other adopters I acted as a mediator helping each to identify bottom line expectations and key elements. As an outsider to both the school and the developer I believe I was able to work in the best interests of both. My lack of biases in the area of reading helped me to be seen as an objective mediator and was particularly helpful when my four schools chose three different programs.

Assistance During Implementation

The research on innovation indicates that the main reason it is difficult to show that any innovation has an impact on student learning is that the innovation is often not actually used. Teachers are highly autonomous professionals who can, and do, choose to ignore or actively resist an innovation. Even when teachers are highly motivated to try an innovation - because they have identified a need, have had a say in the choice, etc. - the temptation is great to resist change and achieve some degree of comfort by modifying the innovation til it's very like what they were doing originally. Teachers trying new things need a lot of reinforcement, they need psychological support, and they need technical assistance to help them use the innovation most effectively.

The Hall-Loucks Concerns Based Adoption Model indicates that teachers beginning an adoption are concerned with the logistics of the implementation--how to do things, what they need to do things right,

and where to find the time to do it all. Their questions and needs are the type that need to be answered by an expert in the chosen program or by administrators in their district. Questions for the program expert are things like "Am I giving this test correctly?" or "How do I group students for instruction?" Questions for local administrators are "Can we change the schedule to accomodate the program?" or "Can we get the supplies and instructional materials we need?" This is a time when an expert's help is clearly needed and in the early part of the year I wondered if implementation assistance would be better provided by a content expert.

I have tried various approaches to providing assistance to implementing teachers. I have visited classrooms in order to provide psychological support, to find out who needs help and who could give it, and to collect questions and needs on the spot. I have held and encouraged meetings of implementing teachers to identify common concerns and to share solutions. I have brought in program experts for follow-up assistance, arranging the logistics of these visits and providing the expert with background information and teachers' questions. I have worked with administrators to get materials ordered and similar needs met. For the most part I have acted as a "broker" of expert resources to provide assistance to implementers.

But implementation assistance to teachers is not enough. The *school* needs assistance if it is to integrate the program. The school as an organization acts as a culture which either nourishes the

implementation or causes it to reject. In every school the new reading program has had implications for programs or requirements already in place, it has caused other issues to surface, or it has provided an opportunity to deal with other issues. Recently one principal said "I wonder if we knew all we were getting into when we decided to adopt this program."

It is important that technical assistance be provided to the school which recognizes the organizational implications of the change. For the first few months everyone at the school is so busy ordering supplies, planning lessons, rearranging the schedule, etc., that they have neither the time nor the energy to deal with other issues. It takes a while for organizational issues to surface. But the Linking Agent, while providing psychological support and coordinating specific services, needs to be sensitive to issues that will need to be addressed later.

One of my schools is now grappling with the issue of coordination of its new developmental reading program with on-going supplemental services like Title I. Another is working on fitting its new management system with the district's continuous progress record system. Some schools have talked about applying The Consortium process to a new curricular area. One district has asked for help in developing a new staff evaluation system linked to professional development opportunities. Each school is working in a different way and wants me to work with them in a particular way. My role continues to evolve.

While aware of the problems of maternal metaphors I am nevertheless strongly reminded of my early experiences as a mother. It seemed to me that just as I figured out how to be a mother to a one-year old - what she needed, how I could cope - I suddenly was the mother of a two-year old who behaved very differently from the one-year old and required different behaviors from me. I believe that schools move through developmental phase as they work on their own growth and consequently need different kinds of help at each phase.

To summarize I believe that if research is truly to influence practice, schools must be helped to find and use research and resources based on research. Any improvement effort involves change and chances for success are increased if there is widespread support for the change within the school and assistance from someone familiar with change processes. In the Consortium project I as the Linking Agent acted as the change facilitator working with both the principal and the multi-constituent group, helping them to use a systematic process to choose a program and working with the school to support its choice. It has been constantly changing and stimulating work, if at times frustrating and puzzling. It is exciting to see all four schools happy with their choices, improving their teaching of reading, and looking to research and federal research and development as resources to solve other problems.